

Refuge in God.

A SERMON,

DELIVERED IN THE

CHURCH OF THE ASCENSION,

PHILADELPHIA,

ON

Sunday Morning, October 26, 1856.

BY THE

RIGHT REV. HENRY U. ONDERDONK, D.D.

PHILADELPHIA:

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CORRESPONDENCE.

PHILADELPHIA, Monday, October 27, 1856.

RIGHT REVEREND AND VERY DEAR SIR :

The undersigned, in common, they believe, with all other persons in the large congregation which was assembled on the morning of yesterday at the Church of The Ascension, listened with uncommon satisfaction to the discourse which you then made in that place.

With many others in this city and elsewhere—members of our Church and persons also not of our communion—we rejoice that Religion is again to be benefited by your public ministrations ; and that the high privilege is opened to us and others of again listening to those pulpit exercises, which, wherever heard in years past, or wherever read in later ones, have been heard or read with profound respect, and by which so many persons have been refreshed, instructed, and improved.

It was a wish either felt or expressed by nearly all, we believe, who heard your discourse on Sunday morning, that its comforting reflections should be carried further than those which, however eloquently, or wherever uttered, have received less illustration in the beauty of example. And we hope that you will gratify us and others, whose

wishes we express with our own, by placing the discourse in our hands for a wider publication.

We have the honour to be, with the utmost respect,

Right Reverend and very Dear Sir,

Your affectionate servants,

CHARLES WILLING,

JAMES J. BARCLAY,

S. W. THACKARA,

FRANCIS WEST,

J. R. GOLDSBOROUGH, U. S. N.,

W. G. THOMAS,

GEORGE W. BIDDLE,

C. B. BARCLAY,

WILSON C. SWANN,

SAMUEL LEWIS,

M. W. COLLET,

JOHN WILLIAM WALLACE.

THE RIGHT REVEREND HENRY U. ONDERDONK, D.D.

TO CHARLES WILLING, JAMES J. BARCLAY,

S. W. THACKARA, ESQS., AND OTHERS,

Gentlemen: I am deeply grateful for your affectionate note and confiding request: and, relying on your judgment, and sharing your hope, that the publication of my discourse may further the edification and the holy comfort of christian brethren, I yield readily to your kind and welcome importunity.

I remain, Gentlemen,

Your greatly obliged friend and servant,

H. U. ONDERDONK.

PHILADELPHIA, October 29, 1856.

REFUGE IN GOD.

“The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knoweth them that trust in Him.”—NAHUM 1 : 7.

It was a gross error of some of the ancient philosophers, and one not unknown in our day, to allege that God is every thing, and every thing is God. That doctrine contradicts both the sublimest and the most practical truths of theology, and is, therefore, justly regarded as but a form of infidelity. Nor should it require profound reasoning to confute it; for it is opposed to a natural sentiment which is as universal as are calamity and grief in this gloomy world,—the natural sentiment of looking to the Most High for protection, “in all our troubles and adversities whensoever they oppress us.” Why ask God for help, if it be God himself who suffers? or why go to Him, if we be God and so have divine succour in ourselves? Simple, almost absurd, as such an expostulation may appear, we must not forget that *we* see that it is gratuitous, because we have the pure light from Heaven, and have never imagined that God and we have any sort of

identity of being, but are taught that He sitteth on the lofty "circle of the earth," while we belong here below; and hence our souls fly to His refuge, whenever trouble makes us feel our own insufficiency. To some remarks on this comforting truth,—REFUGE IN GOD,—we now direct our thoughts. And may the Holy Spirit grant its holy and happy consolation!

All we are, all we have, is derived from the goodness of God; and all the true happiness our souls enjoy is interwoven with reliance on the same unwearied benignity of our Heavenly Parent. It was His goodness which first brought us into being: for, as creatures could do nought for the greater good of the Creator, it could have been love only, entirely disinterested goodness, that raised them from nothing into life,—far greater love than if an old man richly endowed an alien infant. It is God's goodness that preserves us: for without the continual energy of divine power, we could maintain our own existence as little as we could spring into it and give being to ourselves: and when we consider the ingratitude with which we repay this almighty and never-wearied interposition, we shall acknowledge that our perpetual preservation is goodness unspeakable. The goodness of God it is, likewise, which affords a Saviour; seeing that we are fallen, our nature fallen, our very heart and love fallen, and we have no salvation in ourselves: and which provides a Sanctifier, our soul and faculties

being instinctively depraved, so that our natural course, without the aid of the Holy Spirit, would be to evil and that continually,—to evil, and of course to perdition. Such meditations are suggested in every view of ourselves in our high relation with God.

A further and most touching manifestation of the goodness of God is His pity,—His tender pity for us when under trials,—the aid He affords in adversity and grief, when, as of old in the glory within the cloud, He irradiates our deepest gloom: “the Lord said that He would dwell in the thick *darkness*.” And, my brethren, this bland relation between our Maker and ourselves, when thus darkened, though not fundamental, is most endearing,—one that speaks peculiarly to our best feelings. A parent’s rod more wins a child than a thousand toys. Trouble softens the heart, and improves the finer sensibilities, rendering us meek and mild, more easy to be impressed with offers and deeds of kindness. Hence our love of God is doubly heightened, when in sorrow we view Him as our REFUGE, and experience the sweet consolation of reposing on His tender encouragement, and trusting in His almighty protection. “The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knoweth them that trust in Him.”

This touching commendation of the Most High to our confidence is introduced by the prophet in contrast with His stern attributes: “God is jealous;” “the Lord revengeth, and is furious;” “He reserveth wrath for His enemies;” “He will not at all acquit the

wicked;" "who can stand before His indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of His anger?" Such is the aspect of the Almighty towards the impenitent: and it should warn us not to exaggerate His mild attributes,—not to imagine that He is so wholly love as not likewise to be a consuming fire,—not to harbour the opinion, that His benevolence to the sinner, in this life, is a token that He will hereafter be merciful to those who persevere in their sins, and die in their obstinacy. He "will not at all acquit the wicked." There is that in His nature which Himself terms jealousy and fury. And woe to the man on whom this vengeance shall fall, for "it will grind him to powder."

In contrast with these frowns of God on His enemies, the text proclaims His impregnable mercy towards His obedient children, His "goodness to those who trust in Him," especially in their "day of trouble."

Our primary sense of the goodness of God when we are in trouble, is the hope that He will stay the rod, and give us a better portion. This, we believe, He always can do; and our humbly looking to Him to bring it to pass, is a deep acknowledgment of the benignity of His nature. But God's ways are sovereign; the desire of the creature must be wholly subordinate to His supreme will: and hence, it is a far deeper acknowledgment of His goodness, to believe that He is kind to us, though He takes *not* away our trouble. The surgeon is compassionate, though he withhold not the knife. There are joys which can make earthly

sorrows light. Happiness there is, which can brighten the darkest cloud of earthly affliction; and the Lord is good when He kindles this ray in our path, though it be but one beam in the wide surrounding obscurity. As always in nature, so frequently in grace, the most brilliant sky is that which is revealed in the lowest well-pit, in the deepest hiding of the day above us.

Hence, our apprehension of the goodness of God in troubles that are not removed,—our very conception of this His silent, yet speaking goodness, which no man knoweth except he that receiveth it,—arises from His being Himself a better portion than any in this world, one that will never fail to be sufficient: diamond, the one; glass or paste, the other. It is better to have our God though we lose the world, than to possess all earthly good and want His favour; for “in His favour there is life,” the true enjoyment of the present life, and all the life everlasting, enduring happiness, not like the transient gifts of the earth, which hereafter exist not, and which even here burst as we seize them, and vanish as we look upon them. God is further our best portion, in making trouble promote our spiritual benefit. Our most effectual preparation for heaven is becoming, like the Redeemer, perfect through suffering,—so perfect, that even in chastisement we acknowledge that the Lord is good, and that He afflicts us in love, “for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.” That which is a rod for our correction, is also a staff for the support and vigour

of our soul. Bitter medicines are the most effectual in communicating strength; yet is not that homely truth plainer to our ordinary experience, than to our deeper conviction are the latent invigorating effects of adversity and grief. And thus, where the worldly eye can behold nothing but severity, the sanctified discernment of a godly and humble spirit will perceive tokens of benevolence in the fatherly rod, and in the midst of “trouble” will acknowledge that “the Lord is good.”

In the emphatic language of the text, the Almighty is to such of his children “a stronghold,” a fort, a fortress, a place of refuge, a place of fortified security, where they may find protection, and may repel the assaults both of the world and of their spiritual foe. It is the prayer of the Psalmist:—“be Thou my stronghold, whereunto I may always resort.” It is his exultation: “the Lord is my rock and my fortress.” If we were ourselves God, we should have no stronghold but ourselves. If God were but what we are, He would have no greater strength. Better things are taught by the prayer—“set me up upon the Rock that is higher than I.” Are the upright pursued by misfortune? they shelter themselves on that Rock. The adversary would tempt them, as he would Job, to remove their integrity, and curse the hand that corrects them; but they flee from Satan and his vile argument, to their heavenly defence. Or, the wily foe would seduce them into the pleasures of sin, as their solace

under grief, or to sinful gain, or unholy grandeur, as remedies for grief; but they are not ignorant of his devices, and they turn from them to the "salvation which God hath appointed for walls and bulwarks." From the lofty battlements of saving uprightness, they behold the distant unencumbered view, and penetrate the clear space above them. The commanding elevation gives them security, and opens an enlarged prospect beyond the present embarrassment. And of him who hath gained this exalted protection, it may be declared, in the inspiring language of the prophet, "he shall dwell on high; his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks." Nay more, heaven itself shall be discerned,—“thine eyes shall see the King in his beauty; they shall behold the land that is very far off.”

Such is the stronghold of the Christian in "the day of trouble,"—in the day of earthly calamity, and in the more terrible day when the retributions of eternity shall burst upon the wicked. There are tribulation and anguish in the present life, much, very much of them; frequently our own fault, indeed, whether entirely or in part; yet sometimes almost greater than we can bear;—a fountain of tears opened by man himself; yet the draught too often so large and so bitter that our distraction groans for the cup to be removed:—but the Omnipotent God enables us to endure it, and grants comfort greater even than our suffering, the fragrant relish of the cup overfreighting its bitterness. And besides "tribulation and anguish" more intense

than befall us here, there is the “indignation and wrath” of the day of judgment. Then, when the righteous will scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Not in the stronghold of the Most High; their portion is not there: yet there will the saints be protected, and protected forever.

For, my brethren, the saints only are those whom the Lord knoweth. The Lord “knoweth them that trust in Him;” and with the prophet agrees the apostle, “the Lord knoweth them that are His.” Both are the comforting declaration of the one Spirit.—Verily God knoweth them. God discerns the righteous from the wicked, looking into the hearts of all, and seeing all their deeds. Those of His children who are known to men, He knoweth better: and those most hid and most humble, though obscure as the beggar at the rich man’s gate, He knoweth, as having, in their sordid tenement, souls but little lower than the angels, souls which the angels will conduct to the bosom of the father of the faithful. “To know,” means also “to approve,”—“the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous,”—He gives it His approval, for it is the way of His commandments. “To know,” signifies yet further “to confess or acknowledge;” as when the foolish virgins are repulsed—“I know you not,” I do not acknowledge such delinquents,—a fate which will be that of millions before their Judge: while others will hear the promise fulfilled, “whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I also confess [or know] before my

Father who is in heaven." And He who graciously declared, "blessed are they that mourn," intended that all these divine recognitions,—His insearching, His approval, His acceptance,—are especially true of the afflicted. The afflicted godly He discerns, and with pity as well as favour, in the midst of the unworthy, and He imparts to them the happy confidence of His approbation, and a holy persuasion that He will acknowledge them when He cometh to judge the earth. "The Lord is good; He knoweth them that trust in Him."

The goodness of God to His children is not only illustrated by contrast with His severity, but even His severity here prepares them for His abounding goodness both here and hereafter; and, thus, hardship and woe are but the introductory stage of happiness,—yea, a part and portion of their very happiness. The Lord is good throughout, though to our perception and feelings His way and our destiny appear to be mixed, both favour and frowns. Such is usually the divine benevolence. Even the new-born infant cries with pain, because it breathes the air, and sees the light, and though all the beautiful affections of our nature are gently courting its acceptance. It knows not yet that breath is life, that the light is good, and that earthly affections are our earthly heaven. Its capacity for happiness is not yet developed, its idea of happiness not yet imbibed. To its nascent perception, all these little unwonted realities are trouble. Yet is this

trouble an integral part of the goodness of God in its behalf; for without these sufferings (small, indeed, compared with ours, but not small for an infant), it cannot advance in existence, to the sweet return of its mother's tenderness, to the elastic spirits of childhood, to the ardent aspirations of youth, to the deeper bliss of matured affection. Of all this glowing and growing goodness of the Lord, the infant trouble in which it began is, I repeat, an integral portion, the smart as real benevolence as the happiness that follows in its train. And so, my brethren, with *our* troubles, if only we be converted, and have, in the character formed by conversion, become as little children, "blameless and harmless, the sons of God without rebuke." Hence, the apostle declares, "no chastisement for the present *seemeth* to be joyous," implying that the reality is otherwise; for joyous the chastisement *is*, as the first link of the joy it brings in when "yielding the peaceable fruit of righteousness." We, perhaps, see no gladness in it; certainly, what remains of our unsanctified nature does not, more than does the infant in first encountering light and the air, or than does the child when deprived of an amusement or subjected to needful severity. Yet the two are bound together by the Almighty,—the severity and the gladness,—bound together by His laws of providence, by His laws of grace. There is no anomaly, therefore, in the apostle's intimation, that chastisement is joyous, though it *seemeth* not to be so. When that which is "trouble" to sense,

is in the next link found by the infant to be gratification likewise to sense itself, is it a great wonder, that with us what is "trouble" to sense is far more abounding triumph to our faith? That it is so, not only after the good result hath come, but because it tends to that result, and is felt and known to have that inspiring tendency and that glorious effect, and is thus a proof that "the Lord is good," that God hath not forsaken us, hath not forgotten us, in our unthinking pursuits and indulgence? The present life is but our infancy for heaven; and earthly troubles prepare us for that maturity. And so we breathe the divine life, and see the light of the divine countenance, and are welcomed to the divine paternal affection, it matters little, if we gain them not without the murky trials that step by step inure us to enjoyments so wonderful.

In conclusion, brethren, as the Lord "knoweth them that trust in Him," we ought to know Him in whom we trust. But it is declared, "no man knoweth the Father save the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him." We enter not into the stronghold, the fortress of God's abiding protection, unless the Redeemer bring us in, and keep us in that high and holy security. Like, indeed, the sparrow that falleth not to the ground but as Providence directs, and the creatures uncounted who wait upon God to give them meat in due season, those who are none of Christ's are not here forgotten by the all-seeing and all-governing

Supreme :—but, like the subordinate creatures, they are not in His eternal remembrance. Those who are not Christ's, are not God's. And, as it is declared of the lower animals, “Thou hidest Thy face, and they are troubled,” so, in the most terrific sense, will the Almighty hide His face from those who belong not to Christ, and they will undergo the retribution of that “trouble” which will never cease. It will be their final “day of trouble,” and with no stronghold to shelter them. “Alas! who shall live, when God doeth this?” What are calamities now, compared with that “affliction which shall not rise up the second time,” but when it ariseth, ariseth once and forever? Who can imagine the terror of the unchangeable malediction, “Depart from me, I know you not!”

Do you, then, know the Son of God? If so, your heart is His. Hath Christ your heart? My brethren, it is a hard question. Ask first the world. Has the world your heart? If it have, Christ hath no share of it; for He will not divide its affection. Hath wicked pleasure your heart, or pleasure only, not wicked? Hath splendour? Hath amusement? Have earthly learning, or earthly arts? Somewhere in this maze of inferior ties or inferior joys, is not your heart fixed? As surely, then, it belongs not to Christ.

He, whose heart is Christ's, feels his need of Christ; and that need is his noisome burden of sin, his harrowing condemnation for sin. Doth he ask only worldly good and a worldly defence? the religion of

proud reason, of proud, self-relying virtue, outward in motive, and outward in reward, tells him where to seek it. But his eternal welfare is only in the Gospel. Nay more, would he learn the merely intellectual truths of the Gospel; he will find them in the mere letter of Moses, of Paul, of the holy writers,—the fall of man, his condemnation, his rescue. But, to make those truths inward, felt, really known, he must be taught by Christ Himself, by Christ within him, pointing to his own share in all this evil, to his own depraved heart and depraved life,—pointing to his own condemnation,—to his own escape from that curse through the Redeemer,—to his hope of glory for the Redeemer's sake. Here must be the knowledge of his heart, sin and condemnation, pardon and holiness. And Christ must be the Teacher.

If your heart know not these things, beseech the Holy Spirit to make them clear to you, that the promise of Jesus may be fulfilled—"He shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you." Beseech the Holy Spirit to write them deeply within. And search your heart yourselves, that you may discover their plague, and seek its remedy.

Yea, be willing to have trouble, and more than willing, that your heart may be opened to the heavenly monition of the Paraclete. For, what though the outward man perish, and all outward things, if the inward man be renewed day by day. What is "trouble" but happiness, if it make us understand,

that "the Lord is good," for eternity as well as for the life that now is? What is "trouble," if it so knit us to Christ, the good Shepherd, that He can always declare of us, "I know my sheep, and am known of mine."

And now, to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, the one adorable Jehovah, be rendered salvation, and dominion, and glory, forever and ever. AMEN !

